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## Women Homeworkers in Thailand's Digital Economy

By Kamolrat Intaratat<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Home-based work (subcontracted work to be done at home) is widespread in all regions of Thailand. Most homeworkers use their houses as the workplace for producing textiles and garments, wood products, basketry, artificial flower making, food processing, leather goods and plastics, metal products and jewellery, and then deliver them to the employers or business mediators. This is not the same as production for direct sale. In 2007, the National Statistical Office (NSO) reported that out of the 249,290 households, there were 440,251 people earning their livelihoods through homeworking. Of this number, 337,526 or slightly more than three quarters of them were women and 102,725 were men. This study builds on previous research conducted in 2006 on the status of women homeworkers in Thailand and their use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to promote economic empowerment and generate new income opportunities. Since 2006, Thailand has undergone numerous social, economic, and political changes. Acknowledging the problems homeworkers face, in 2010, the Thai Parliament passed the Homeworkers Protection Act B.E. 2553 and a social protection policy came into force in May 2011. The law mandates fair wages, including equal pay for men and women doing the same job. Even though this Act is in effect, most homeworkers are still not aware of their legal rights and keep working under unfair conditions. This research study will present the enabling and disabling environments, for the material wellbeing of women homeworkers, their level of awareness and ability to improve their situation, and their access to and control of resources to use ICT to develop their businesses in Thailand's fast growing digital economy. It will also examine the activities related to gender equality issues in women's use of ICT and the effects of these efforts for gender governance and women's economic empowerment.

*Keywords:* women homeworkers in Thailand, digital economy, ICT, entrepreneurship, economic empowerment

### Introduction

Thailand has a population of 67.2 million people. The participation of women in the labor force has always been high, and married women continue to work throughout their lives, even while raising children. The [Labor Force Survey \(June 2014\)](#), of the National Statistic Office (NSO), shows that in a population over 15 years of age of 54.83 million, 38.38 million people are employed, 0.45 million are unemployed and 0.10 million are seasonally not active in the labor

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force. In addition, 15.90 million people, including housewives, students and the elderly are not in the labor force. Homeworkers can be classified into two main groups: a) those who work individually from their homes, and b) those who work in groups (e.g., housewife group, women's group). Studies conducted by Chasombat and Pradit (1999) and Intaratat (2014) show that 67 percent of homeworkers individually work from home as assemblers or producers, 13 percent help in the home-based business of the family or work in groups, while another nine percent are employees of homeworkers. The rest are contractors and subcontractors.

For over a decade, Thailand has been internationally recognized as a regional centre for ICT growth and development. The country recognizes that ICT literacy provides opportunities for women to fully and equally participate in the digital economy and society, and exercise their right to speak, share ideas, access information and build knowledge. The existing 2,500 telecentres scattered across the country and set up at sub-district administrative offices, community centers, health care centers, schools, and the Universal Social Obligation ICT center called the USO NET in short. Community Centers, provide access to ICTs and the Internet in rural and remote areas with a focus on digital literacy. E-services indeed play a significant role in development by accelerating public service delivery, improving government accountability, encouraging civil participation in decision making processes, boosting the digital economy, among others. However, unless rural people are empowered with digital literacy and entrepreneurial skills, they will remain digitally excluded and marginalized in terms of access and use of information communication technology (ICT). This research outlines three main issues concerning Thai women homeworkers using ICTs:

- 1) Marginalization of women in the labour market. Although labour force participation of women in Thailand is high, the issues related to women's status in employment and the recognition of the contribution of women in reproductive and productive work is still a concern. The participation in economic activities increases the burden of women as they still bear most of the responsibilities for the domestic work. Household division of labour is still engendered and the introduction of ICT usage may add instead of reduce homeworkers' burden and responsibilities.
- 2) Invisibility of Women. Many women remain 'invisible' in the production process especially those homeworkers who are subcontractors or waged-homeworkers. They produce parts of end products. They are also not regarded as the main users of technology.
- 3) Masculine culture of technology. In some cultures, there are inherent factors which hinder women from using technology. These factors promote and facilitate the control and mastery of technology by men. In Thailand, this situation has improved somewhat as women have to some extent gained accessibility since ICT has become affordable, widened its coverage, and became user-friendly. ICT tools have become commonly used to promote gender equity, particularly the use of smartphones.

## Objectives

In relation to the general concerns addressed above, the study examines issues of gender relations and the use of ICTs for economic activities among women homeworkers in Thailand's digital economy; in particular, in the following key areas:

- 1) The enabling environment or the contexts, structures and mechanisms supporting women homeworkers and their use of ICTs for home-base work;
- 2) ICT relevant policy, activities or efforts to empower women homeworkers in this current Thailand's Digital Economy.

### **ICT Policy Reform in 2000s and National Broadband Policy for National Development**

Article 78 of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand B.E. 2550 (2007) calls for the state to undertake public administration in order to develop the society, economy and security of the country in a sustainable manner, it also includes the creation and provision of public services, public utilities, and comprehensive local information infrastructure that is equal throughout the country. The Communication Technology Policy Framework (2011-2020) or ICT 2020 was promulgated in order to serve as the framework for developing ICT until all citizens can access universally, with world-class quality and security standards by the year 2020.

In the global context, the development of ICT in Thailand can be considered average, when measured against worldwide indices such as the “Networked Readiness Ranking” and “e-Readiness Ranking” indices. However, when Thailand is compared to other countries in Asia, especially with neighbouring countries such as Singapore and Malaysia, it turns out that they are more developed than Thailand in all the indices. (ETDA, 2015). The main factor holding back the development of ICT in Thailand in all indices is the readiness of the information and communication infrastructure, which is still insufficient and has limited coverage (NECTEC, 2012). This constrains the development and use of ICT, which is still inefficient and ineffective, in building up knowledge, developing enterprises and serving the government. Thus, the development of ICT infrastructure is an important issue that the ICT Master Plan must resolve.

The Ministry of Information and Communication Technology (MICT) was established in 2002 with the mission to use ICT to promote sustainable development. Although differing in mission and responsibilities, different ministries and agencies share the following common direction and goals when it concerns promoting sustainable development through ICT:

- Human resource development, as people are the foundation for national development.
- Economic and industrial development, emphasizing strategic industries (agriculture, manufacturing and services).
- Social and community development that allows for participatory approaches to local development and management, including the revival and transmission of Thai cultural diversity, such as way of life, customs, values and local wisdom.
- Building of a stable natural resource base, by focusing on addressing environmental problems, including natural disaster warning.
- Improvement of governance, by emphasizing transparency in the public and private sector and allowing the people to participate in the social and economic development process.
- Infrastructure development and the establishment of specialized agencies and institutions to mobilize development.

## Methodology

Three locations in Thailand, namely, Lumpang, Chiangrai and Srisakate, were selected for the fieldwork of this research project. The selection criteria of these three provinces was based on homeworkers' outstanding artisanal products (e.g. Five Stars One Tambon One Product: OTOP, Small Medium Enterprise: SME, ICT skills and competencies of homeworkers, and their demand to scale up their entrepreneurial and e-business strategies. In the first stage, twenty-seven leaders from each of the three provinces were interviewed as well as focus group discussions subsequently, oral histories were also taken among the 27 key informants. In the second stage, the in-depth interviews with nine key informants selected from the 27 key informants whom represented each type of homebased works. The open-ended and semi-structured interviewing guide were used.

## Research Findings

The research findings map out homeworkers' life contexts and the challenges they face while carrying out home-based work in Thailand's digital economy.

### Profile of Home-Based Work

#### *Homeworkers' personal characteristics*

Over 80 percent of homeworkers in Thailand are women (Intaratat, 2014; [www.ccdkm.org](http://www.ccdkm.org)). The majority of homeworkers interviewed in this study, work individually from home although a significant number work with others as groups (e.g., family-based, group-based enterprises). Those who work individually from home, are small scale homeworkers or homepreneurs with others working for them. Homeworkers who work individually are likely to belong to or are registered with groups but may or may not be active members of the group.

Results from the interview survey indicate that the majority of homeworkers' working age may vary, with the oldest being 80 years old and the youngest being 13 years old. There is no one in the group who is below the legal working age although the data from the Office of National Statistics indicated the prevalence of child labour (ages 10 to 13) in homeworking. A third of the 27 homeworkers interviewed are between the ages of 30 to 39; 24% are between 40 to 49 years old; and 24% are between 50 to 59 years.

A majority of homeworkers (69%) are married with children, though a significant number of their husbands are working away from home as migrant workers. Those working elsewhere within Thailand return home two to three times a year whereas those working abroad are only able to return every two to three years. A few homeworkers narrated sad tales of 'disappearing' husbands who come and go without informing their wives of their intention. One told of her unskilled husband who was unable to hold a steady job and would squander away any money he earned. He was killed in a drunken brawl. Though the homeworkers talked about other women's husbands coming home with sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS, it was not certain how many of these women also suffer the same fate (Intaratat, K. and Lomchavakarn, P. 2014). They certainly bear the main burden of caring and maintaining the family and aged dependants with little or no remittance from their 'absent' husbands. Many of the homeworkers interviewed believe that a 'good wife' is supposed to be able to make ends meet no matter how little the husband provides.

*“After we got married, our livies have to devoted and honest to our husbands no matters what will happen”.*

Many homeworkers choose to work from home because of domestic responsibilities, which are largely carried out by women. There are also those who returned home after losing their jobs following the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 and other crises. In addition, a great number of women have worked in a formal working environment such as a factory but found these jobs provide them with only a small income which is barely able to meet their basic needs for transportation, lunches and clothes. Others were faced with an income that is too small to hire domestic help or send children to nursery schools. Because of their desire to work more independently and with flexibility, many women opted for home-based work. The shift from a part-time job to full-time home-based work has increased since 1999 when more incentives for home-based work were made available by the government and new opportunities arose in the industries and markets.

#### *Household and home-based work socio-economic features*

Women homeworkers interviewed in Lumpang, Chiangrai and Srisakate<sup>2</sup> are more likely to own their house or live in lower or middle class suburban residential areas. They also usually stay with their extended families. Many homeworkers enter home-based work to earn extra income even though their earning is sometimes minimal. The reason for their choice may vary from reducing loneliness during the daytime to using their local wisdom gained from their ancestors:

*“I got vocational trainings from some of my local government agencies to produce local products after my farm works as well as my household works. It is great because I can have some small income from it as well as some relaxation during working on it such as silk or weaving, etc. I worked both individual in my home as well as worked with other Women Group’s members”.*

Initially, they may not gain any support from their family members and will have to prove that they can manage all the burdens and challenges of both domestic responsibilities and productive work.

There are clear divisions of labour along gender lines within the family in reproductive work. The women in the family assume full responsibility for the household chores. Most homeworkers give priority to the care of dependents be they children, elderly parents, relatives who are unemployed or disabled members of their families. In Northern provinces in Thailand such as Chiangrai and Lumpang, males are more likely to help with cooking if the women are heavily burdened. In some small families, the husband and children are likely to help with housework in order to ensure the survival of the family; women, however, are still the first to rise and the last to retire at night<sup>3</sup>.

Children assist homeworkers especially during school holidays, or during their free time after school or weekends in their productive work. Male homeworkers or husbands help distribute and market the products, or serve as messengers and undertake heavy jobs. Daughters are more likely to help sewing and performing accounting tasks, while sons often help in products’ quality

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<sup>2</sup>[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/4/44/Thailand\\_Sisaket\\_locator\\_map.svg/2000px-Thailand\\_Sisaket\\_locator\\_map.svg.png](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/4/44/Thailand_Sisaket_locator_map.svg/2000px-Thailand_Sisaket_locator_map.svg.png)

<sup>3</sup> In the North of Thailand, a family’s activities are seen more as the norm in their daily life style compared to other regions.

control and stocks. Thus, it is apparent that the division of labour in productive work is also according to gender.

The household income of the homeworkers interviewed is between US\$100 to US\$550 per month. The average working hours are 10 to 12 hours per day, and their average income is mostly between US\$ 7 to US\$ 12 per day. Research results indicated that the female Northern homeworkers, belonging to the sewing group, earned around 150-200 Baht per day (US\$ 5-7) or US\$ 100-150 per month. Homeworkers in the silk and pottery making sectors earn more than US\$100 per month; in contrast, homeworkers working in the garment only earn US\$ 70-80 per month. The majority from this group are primary earners with occasional income from husbands or children doing casual jobs. However, although the rest have earnings which exceed this amount, the cost of living in the three sites selected is higher. Thus although the homeworkers earn more than the national poverty line income, they are in fact still poor<sup>4</sup>.

### *Skills and training*

The homeworkers interviewed are mainly engaged in the following types of work:

- Garments/Clothes: Sewing, embroidery, clothes decoration, and cloth mattresses (40%);
- Handicraft: Wood carving, weaving, clothes hangers, mulberry papers and products, and artificial flowers (25.5%);
- General home-based work: Food services, decorative items, other types of souvenirs, and factory-related products, i.e. powder puff which is not a handicraft (12.4%);
- Local wisdom home-based work: Silk weaving, cotton weaving and decoration, and Benjarong pottery - high-end products which allow homeworkers to earn higher income (10.6%);
- Services: Traditional massage, beauty salon (4%);

The home-based work is primarily centred around the making of creative products with only a few linked to the food-processing industry. Some products like silk and pottery are for niche markets. There is a slight differentiation in the type of homeworking among the three sites as noted below:

#### ▪ *Lumpang province*

- Dress decorations
- Knitting
- Sewing decorations
- Decorated pottery (Benjarong pottery)
- Services (i.e., Thai traditional massage)
- Cowboy hats

#### ▪ *Chiangrai province*

- Cloth mattresses
- Sewing decorations, general clothes sewing
- Cooking: Thai desserts and Thai cuisine

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<sup>4</sup> All those homebased workers still cannot access to any marketing channel by themselves, they have to sell via middleman channel (Kamolrat, 2014).

- Coffee
- Knitted souvenirs for local tourism
- *Srisakate province*
  - Silk and cotton weaving, and some handicrafts from pieces of silk and cotton
  - Mattress made from pieces of cloth
  - Artificial flowers
  - Bakery
  - Services (i.e., beauty salon, traditional massage)
  - Local tourism

Some of the home-based work skills, such as silk and pottery making, are passed on from one generation to the next. Of the homeworkers interviewed many said they learned very few skills from formal school education. Some skills were acquired from previous jobs, normally factory jobs or jobs with village work groups. Some government agencies and contract companies provide or support the training of homeworkers. Among these initiatives are the programmes of the Department of Community Development, Ministry of Interior; Bureau of Labour Skills Development, Ministry of Labour; Department of Non-Formal Education, Ministry of Education; and Department of Export Promotion, Ministry of Commerce. (Chasombat, Pradit, 1999).

#### *Policy or efforts to address women homeworkers*

ICT policies that are particularly relevant to Thai women homeworkers are:

#### *E-government*

E-government is a new form of government administration, one that uses computer technology and communication networks to provide better services to businesses and citizens. It also boosts the efficiency of government operations as well as enhancing good governance and transparency. ICT can serve as a tool to boost the country's development into a knowledge-based society. At the same time, the use of the Internet as an electronic means for public service provision allows citizens to get closer or more familiar to government policies while the government can strengthen its relationship with citizens.

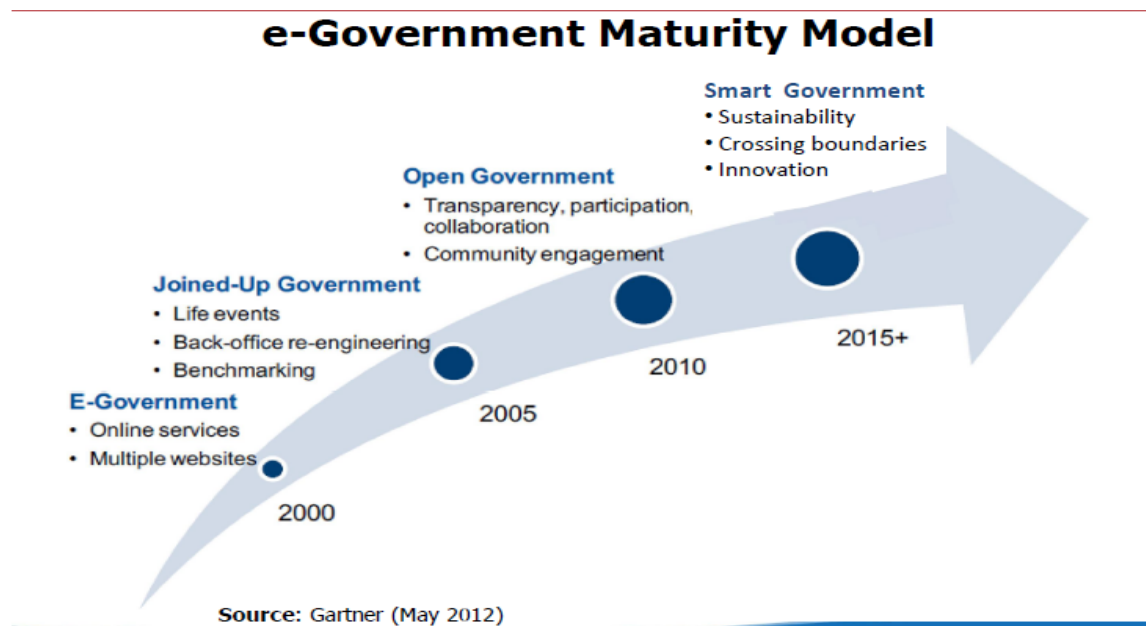
The targets for Thailand's e-government policy are based on the following principles: red tape-reduction, rapid-response, rural coverage, round the clock (24x7), equality and transparency. The e-government project, jointly implemented by the Ministry of ICT and NECTEC<sup>5</sup> has developed a system to monitor readiness for e-government development, called Service E-Readiness Explorer, or SEE. The SEE system is composed of subsidiary systems: a system for the integration and monitoring of ICT operational plans; a system to survey and monitor progress in the development of electronic services like automatic website survey; and an interactive program to monitor progress. In terms of ICT usage within the public sector, it was found that the government's IT budget has risen continually, with an emphasis for the most part on the development of government-service systems. This is in line with the seventh strategy laid out in the national ICT Master Plan.

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<sup>5</sup> NECTEC: the national Electronics and Computer Technology Center, Ministry of Science and Technology



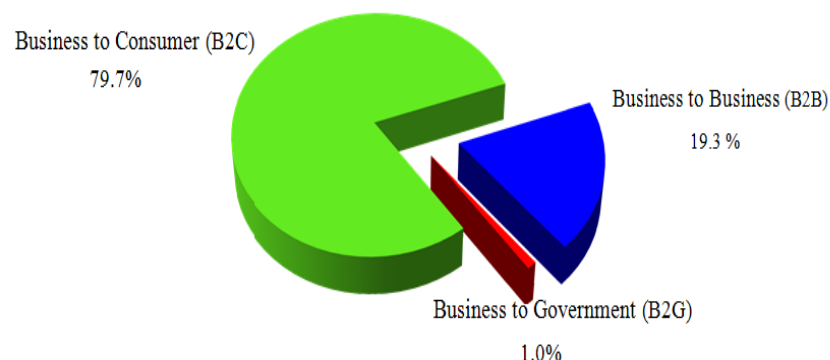
**Figure 1: E-Government policy and development (NECTEC, 2012)**



### *E- Commerce*

The National Statistical Office (NSO) has annually conducted a survey on the status of e-Commerce in Thailand since 2007. The survey aims to obtain information about the current e-Commerce businesses, obstacles and recommendations that need assistance and support provided by the government sector to determine policies, formulate plans and measures in order to enhance the potential for e-Commerce development and commercial competitiveness. Besides, this survey can be used as a follow-up assessment of prior e-Commerce developments. In the meantime, private sector businesses can use this information as a guide to expand their markets and adapt their competitiveness to the market in more appropriate manners.

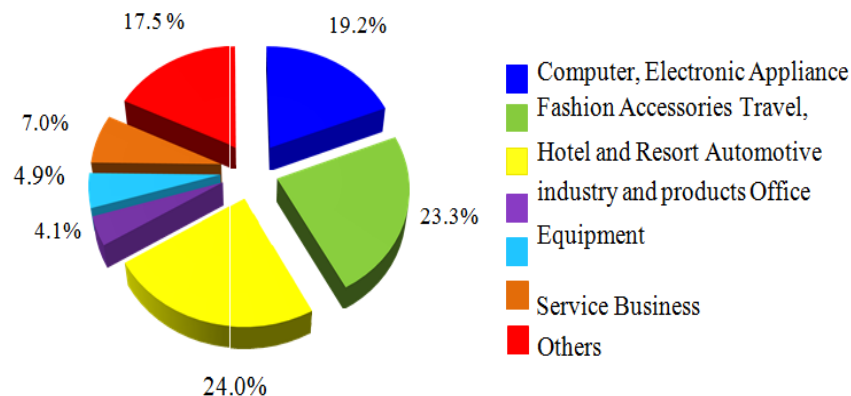
**Figure 2: Information of e- Commerce business (NECTEC, 2012)**



Most of e-Commerce businesses are led by entrepreneurs engaged in B2C (79.7%) and B2B (19.3%). Those engaged in B2G without e-Auction from procurement with government, were only about 1.0% (Figure 2).

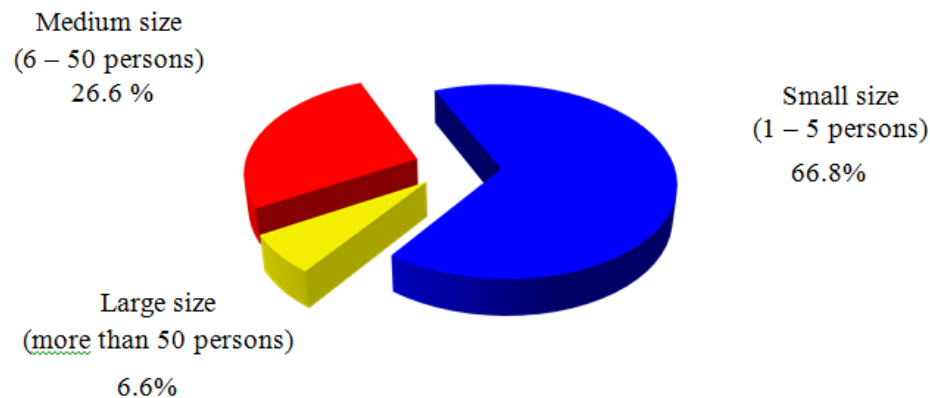
Considering the large scale of e-Commerce businesses, the survey showed that the most popular industries were mostly travel, hotels and resorts (24.0%), next was the fashion industry, accessories and jewellery (23.3%), computers, electronic appliances and the Internet (19.2%), service businesses (7.0%), office equipment (4.9%), followed by the automotive industry and products (4.1%) and others (17.5%), respectively (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Percentage of e- Commerce business by type (NECTEC, 2012)**



The survey also showed that most e-Commerce businesses were: small enterprises (66.8%), with 1-5 persons engaged, medium enterprises (26.6%), with 6-50 persons engaged, followed by large enterprises, with more than 50 persons engaged.

**Figure 4: Percentage of e- Commerce business by sizes of business (NECTEC, 2012)**



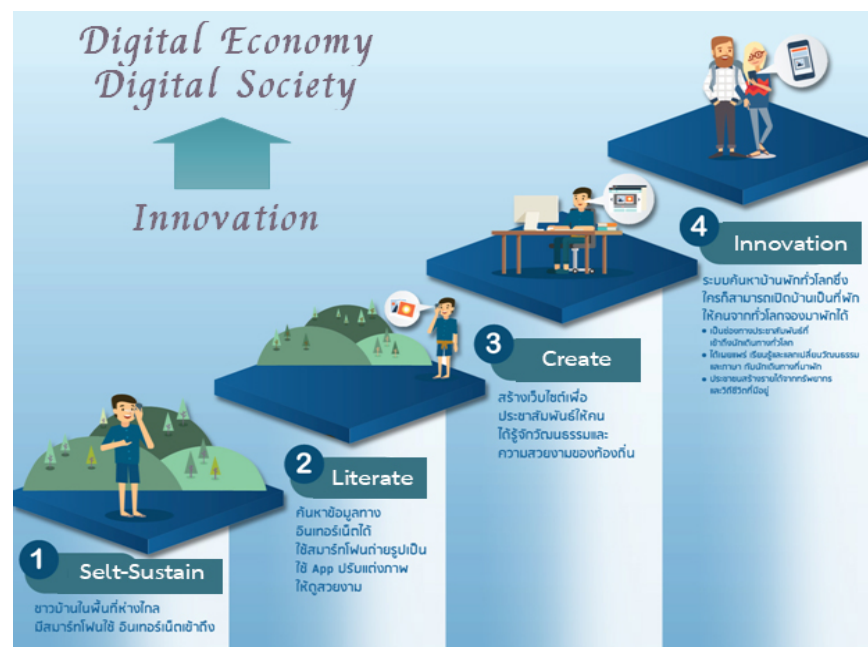
#### *Current policy: Digital Economy and the Thai Economy in 2015*

The Royal Thai Government has pledged to promote the digital economy in order to modernize the country for the benefit of the Thai economy, recognizing that digital technologies enable people all over the world to connect without borders and to have easier and quicker access to information through the Internet. The Ministry of Information and Communication Technology is joining hands with the Federation of Thai Industries in translating the Government's policy on the digital economy into action. The Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) has predicted that in 2015, the Thai economy would grow by four percent.

"Digital economy" refers to an economy that is based on digital technologies, which are rapidly transforming both business practices and societies. The Thai government is giving a boost to the digital economy in order to enhance the competitiveness of the Thai industrial sector and prepare Thailand for the ASEAN Economic Community. In response to this policy, entrepreneurs and operators of the digital business will be created and developed, in order to become a driving force for the country's productivity. The strategic framework for digital economy promotion consists of four main areas: Digital Commerce, Digital Entrepreneurship, Digital Innovation, and Digital Contents. In pushing forward this strategic framework, the MICT aims to promote a new generation of entrepreneurs, as well as commercial and industrial innovations. At the same time, the MICT will assist traders and investors in turning to the digital system and creating a new market for the digital content industry. Entrepreneurs will be urged to be aware of the importance of the use of ICT in enhancing efficiency and reducing production costs. Related laws will also be revised in order to accommodate the digital economy in the future.

### Current Digital Economy Policy in Thailand

**Figure 5: Current Digital Economy Policy in Thailand** (<https://www.etda.or.th/2016>)



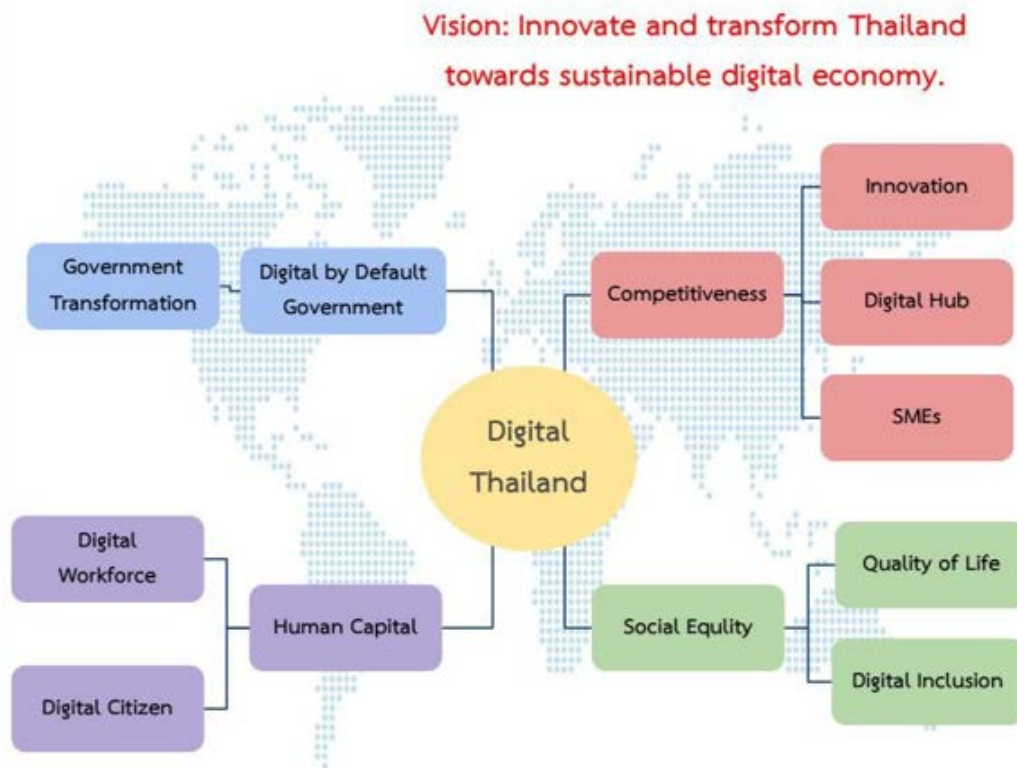
Thailand's digital economy and society framework is based on five supporting pillars:

- a) **Hard Infrastructure:** this framework focuses on reliable networks with enough capacity, coverage and suitable pricing as a prerequisite to economic and social development. The national broadband initiative proposes to pool together existing network resources that belong to state enterprises, government agencies, as well as private companies for more efficient resource planning and usage. Moreover, hard infrastructure also aims to increase investments in data centers and international gateway capacity.

- b) Service Infrastructure: refers to infrastructure that enables service innovations in both government and business sectors. This pillar promotes service platforms that will allow data from multiple sources to be linked and mashed-up to create innovative services. Government data will be open and integrated through government service platforms with the goal to provide paperless, one-stop, citizen-centric services. For example, this will eliminate traditional requirements of using hard copies of citizen ID and house registration.
- c) Soft Infrastructure: refers to the underlying processes to guarantee secure and trust in digital transactions. New laws and regulations are being created, while the existing ones are being updated—especially to improve user privacy protection and data security. In addition to electronic transaction promotion, this pillar also addresses trade facilitation with an electronic document exchange system.
- d) Digital Economy Promotion: aims to boost the Thai economy through a vibrant digital business ecosystem. Digital technologies will transform how Thai businesses of all sizes operate—especially the Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), from competing for prices to creating new value for products and services. Digital commerce as well as digital marketing are important tools to bring the SMEs and OTOP (One Tamboon One Product) products into market. Furthermore, capacity building in the area of digital entrepreneurship, e-commerce, and digital marketing are necessary to achieve a long-term economic growth.
- e) Digital Society Promotion: In order for Thailand to become a digital society, everyone—especially the less privileged groups—should have easy access to information as well as public services via digital means. Such equal access can be achieved by means of universal design and digital inclusion projects. In addition, it envisions a digital society where all citizens can learn throughout life and also become media and information literate.

## Thailand Digital Economy: Aims and Vision

Figure 6: Thailand Digital Economy aims and vision (<https://www.eta.or.th/2016>)



### Programmes and activities directed at homeworkers

#### Action towards ICT-enabled home-based work

##### 1. Women, employment, and policy

“Social justice and rights” is one of the key elements of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint which constitutes the Roadmap for the ASEAN Community as the *Cha-am Hua Hin Declaration on Roadmap for the ASEAN Community* was adopted at the 14th ASEAN Summit in Cha-am, Thailand on March 1, 2009. Based on its commitment to promote social justice and mainstream people’s rights into its policies and all spheres of life, including the rights and welfare of children and women, Thailand, as one of ASEAN’s member states, has set a strategic objective to “safeguard the interests and rights as well as provide equal opportunities, and raise the quality of life and standard of living, for women, children, ...” (ASEAN 2009: 78).

In Thailand, the economic sector is more gender equal than the political sector; in fact, women play an active role in the economic development of the country. On the [Gender Gap Index \(2015\)](#) of the World Economic Forum (WEF), Thailand ranks 60 out of 145 countries (see Figure 1), preceded by Philippines (7), Lao PDR (52), and Singapore (54), in ASEAN. While Thailand and Vietnam have the highest percentage of women professionals and technical workers in the world, a high ratio of female economic activity may not be a synonym for gender equality. In fact, the two countries have been unable to close the widening gender pay gap (ASETUC, 2013), and even though the number of women-led enterprises not connected to the family has risen

significantly in the past four or five decades, most management positions are still held by men.

#### *National Labor Laws in Thailand*

- a) Labor Relation Act 1975 (B.E. 2518)
- b) Immigration Act 1979
- c) Social Security Act 1990 (B.E. 2533)
- d) Measure in Prevention and Suppression of Trafficking in Women and Child 1997 (B.E. 2540)
- e) Labor Protection Act 1998
- f) Persons with Disabilities Empowerment Act 2007
- g) Alien Working Act 2008

Thailand has made significant progress in development over the past three decades having seen the poverty incidence decreased to of 8% in 2009 and significant improvements in health, education and social services. Amidst the rapid growth, Thailand faces socio-economic inequalities, widening income gaps, uneven development between urban and rural areas, and unequal access to resources and social services. As the richest quartile in Thailand makes about half of the income, the lowest quartile garnered less than 10% of the income ([www.unwomen.org](http://www.unwomen.org), 2015)

The country has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1985 and its Optional Protocol in 2000, and endorsed the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It has developed the Millennium Development Goals Plus, with the spirit of treating the MDGs as the floor and not the ceiling, and has made significant efforts to integrate the international principles and instruments into the policy and programming framework, evident in the Constitution B.E. 2550 (2007), which has anti-sex discrimination and gender equality provisions. The Protection of Domestic Violence Victim Act was promulgated in 2007, and the penal codes and sex discrimination laws have largely been revised.

Challenges in gender equality and the empowerment of women in Thailand remain in the areas of lack of sex disaggregated data, traditional attitudes and stereotypes which underpin domestic violence and violence against women, low participation of women in politics and decision-making positions, discrimination and vulnerabilities of ethnic and rural women as well as women in the informal sector, HIV prevalence, trafficking and exploitation.

#### *The Digital Economy Campaign in 2015*

As for 2015, Thailand's GDP is likely to grow by between 3.5 and 4.5 percent, as exports are expected to increase following the recovery of major global economies. Private investment in 2015 is expected to expand by 5 percent, since the Government is accelerating investment promotion. Tourism continues to grow, while the Government is accelerating major investment projects in the public sector. It has been suggested that economic management in 2015 emphasize farmers and SMEs, as agricultural products are facing falling prices and the country has to deal with volatility in the global economic and financial situation.

#### *Digital Economy Activities*

In Thailand, it is clear that without strong multi-stakeholder partnerships, national and ASEAN's strategic priorities to strengthen the competitiveness of the ICT sector and narrow the



digital divide within and among member states, cannot be achieved. Building an enhanced Thai and ASEAN connectivity and digital inclusion requires not only the development of new strategies and institutions, but also investment in more effective implementation of existing and future initiatives. Successful initiatives and recent programs that have contributed to the empowerment of women homeworkers in Thailand to fulfil the priorities of the Digital Economy Policy Plan Pillar 4, namely: Digital e-Commerce, Digital Entrepreneurs, Digital Innovation, and Digital Contents include:

- The Very Local Trip Community Based Tourism project spearheaded by The Research Center of Communication and Development Knowledge Management (CCDKM) and private sectors. This project integrates the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of development by enhancing the capacities of locals in using ICT to promote and conserve cultural and environmental heritage, arts and crafts and new opportunities for job creation and income generation;
- Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) for rural and disadvantaged communities on: Social Entrepreneurship; Communicative English; Social Media for Business, Smartphone Photography, Branding, Marketing and start-up Community Co-working Spaces, ASEAN media and communication. These free courses will be accessible to rural Thais and the initiative was created through partnerships between academia, the private sector and the government;
- CRAFTS and Social Entrepreneurship - CCDKM has met the demand of thousands of women homeworkers to upgrade through ICT, their entrepreneurial, design and styling skills to fit the trends and requirements of international and regional markets. For the first time in Thailand, local and international trainers, fashion and lifestyle experts, have joined forces to deliver an innovative, practical and community friendly pedagogy based on hands on experience and collaborative learning. Over 200 women have already benefit from the free simplified trainings on how to build a brand, business communication, social media for business, smartphone photography, product pictures and retouching for commercial use, landscape and tourism photography, financial literacy, and online business solutions to sell products directly to customers. The project was initiated by The National Broadcasting Telecommunication Commission (NBTC), the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, the Office of Women Affairs, and academia;

**Figure 8: Crafts and Social Entrepreneurship Training** ([www.ccdkm.org](http://www.ccdkm.org),2015)



*SAFSEN* is an ICT based platform that was designed to: provide agricultural tips on appropriate technology to rural small-scale farmers in ASEAN; bridge gaps in educational and literacy levels; narrow the digital divide (gender and geographic); link and network ASEAN

farmers; and enhance food security through sustainable agriculture technologies. The SAFSeN training course created by CCDKM is available in English, Thai, Bahasa, Malay and Vietnamese. It teaches farmers how to use the ICT platform, write content and report stories from the field, shoot, edit and upload photographs on the web, use Facebook and Line to share and communicate information on sustainable agriculture technologies. CCDKM has trained both online and offline 5,000 farmers in Thailand and Laos. For most farmers, it was their first time to use social media to raise awareness about their work. Furthermore, their English literacy skills also improved. After the successful outcomes of this project, Thailand's *SMART Farmers* model was taken as an example in the ASEAN region. SMART Farmers from Northern Thailand trained 37 Cambodian farmers and in partnership with CCDKM and Oxfam, launched the first two Community Innovation Centers (CCIC), in Pursat and Takeo provinces. The Project aims to improve the digital literacy capacity of Cambodian farmers, and empower them with access to important information sources, including crop choice, weed control, environment and climate change, weather information, markets; and promote nationally and regionally their own stories, products and services.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The study of 27 women homeworkers and homepreneurs in Lumpang, Chiangrai and Srisakate has provided insights into the work, lives and challenges that women still face in Thailand despite their access to ICT devices, particularly Smartphones. To prevent those who are unable to organise themselves and work in groups or those who have poor quality products, from becoming marginalised, there is a need for the implementation of policies and plans to cater to homeworkers who operate as individuals, i.e. piece-rate, subcontractors and waged workers of homepreneurs, who lack bargaining power. The policies should protect them and accord them benefits. Target groups have to be supported and given access to the resources and assistance provided by the various agencies. Moreover, the study has also identified the need of homepreneurs and homeworkers' groups, of "one stop service centres" or "community co-working space" where target groups can use ICT to access and disseminate information that is relevant to their needs. While the surveyed homeworkers are able to access resources using ICT, more capacity building training is need. E- Services of all relevant agencies under the Smart Thailand must be integrated and more facilitated by ICT. More tailored made academies for homebased workers as well as other marginalizes must be one among the priorities. Peer training and networks socialization under the "one stop service centres" or "community co-working space" also must be more promoted.

In addition, relevant agencies and stakeholders should promote networking amongst homeworkers drawing on simple and affordable ICT tools and applications. This would be especially helpful to expand their access to relevant information concerning training, study trips, different levels of marketing outlets, and e- marketing to receive orders, especially from overseas. Such access will expose both groups to more opportunities, different perspectives, and ideas about how to strengthen their local businesses.

With the Thai government, promoting the use of ICT and facilitating its penetration into the world of the homeworkers, all interviewees had access to mobile phones (smart phones are more visible). Efforts and policies are continuously made to increase the affordability of ICT tools and promote their use for community and business development. Furthermore, the research reveals the need for ICT gender sensitization and training in any tailor made demands from particular



homeworker groups. This will be particularly beneficial in improving gender relations, gender equality and removing the feeling of inadequacy related to technology. Some interviewees stated:

*“It would be great if there will be friendly technology or ICT which I can use during my work such as cooking, weaving, farming, etc.”*

*“I would like to use ICT and I think it is not difficult, but I really don’t know how to start it and if any problems occur, whom should I consult, etc.”*

Mobile phones, especially smart phones, are extensively used for communicating business transactions including orders from overseas. Some of the leaders from homeworkers use free calls, free messages via LINE, Facebook, Skype in fundamental transaction. But this kind of e-transaction still under some small parts of them, still not actively used among all the majority ones. Although mobile phones are widely used, their full potential has not been exploited yet. Currently, homeworkers use mobile technology mainly for verbal communication, rather than for business purposes. Simple and applicable software especially any kind of visualized Application software (App.) must be designed and made available for homeworkers to overcome language barriers when conducting their business internationally and sending designs to customers and responding to orders. As a result of the current government-positive policies and stakeholders’ training initiatives, as well as its positive evolution of all stakeholders and partners for nearly a decade (such as E- Services, OTOP, e- marketing platforms, Start Up policy, etc) Thailand could eventually produce more tangible and positive changes among Thai women homeworkers’ social status as well as uplift their quality of life.

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